[Space and John Winocur]

IV.

LIVING FOLKLORE

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8/8/'39 II - SPACE AND JOHN WINOCUR

Time on your hands is what you got most of, if you're pounding a key a board ship. It's something else again for the land operator—he puts through maybe seventy-five messages in an hour. But us guys, we got it easier on that score, you might say— speed's not so important. It's persistence, and knowing how to buck the air waves in all weathers, making connections with other ships on the relay chain, and sticking [?] / on the phones through emergencies .... - A sort of glutton for long term punishment is a cableman at sea.

It's a different proposition all around. First of all, a guy who takes his ‘bug’ bug to sea had better be extra fond of his own company, ' because he's going to have to spend 18 to 20 / eighteen to twenty-five days' at a stretch / setting in his little six by twelve cabin dressed in earphones and holding a conclave with the instrument board. He'll be relieved to eat and sleep and that's about all. Even though he's sending or intercepting messages for probably only a fraction of his time [?] he's got to remain on duty regardless— so in slack hours 2 he has plenty of opportunity to think, or memorize poetry, or write his diary in code— or weave wicker baskets if he feels that way inclined. Me, I made a study of Hamlet one trip — “To be or not [??????????] to be —- .... “ Yep, that Danish fellow was quite a card— a bit of a pansy maybe, but I could sympathize with him. Like me, he had too much time on his hands— he thought too much.

Nights especially. That's when the old thinker takes you for a ride sometimes. I'll be sitting there in the cabin, my ears glued to the phones, waiting for signals, and match the waves slap at the portholes. All the miles of black water laying under this tub, I'll be thinking, and different kinds of fish populating the sea— some with eyes like headlights, and some with phosphorescent bodies, and electric eels and things. And under all that [?] [???] miles below, there's this big tangled network of cables laying down there on the ocean floor where no man has ever been. They had to lay [?] those cables from above, lowered them in relays from ships. Each one is really a hollow steel rod, with the wires insulated inside of it. They're built [practically*1] to last *1 forever, 3 but there are certain things that can happen to them. An earthquake , for instance , can bust that cable, and such a thing happened a few years back in the Pacific. The cables are built flexible so that there's not too much wave resistance, and then they're weighted down here and there to withstand the tides. I like to wonder what all those different kinds of deep sea fish think about that cable when they nose around down there. [?] And all the wrecks of old ships, skulls and bones floating around— sorta mysterious isn't it? # Then take the story of the whale that disrupted the cable between New York and London couple years ago. It's a fact. Was in all the papers. There was a rupture reported in the line a way's off the English coast, and the repair crew was sent out to investigate. They figured the break must have been caused by an earthquake on the sea bottom— nothing less had ever been known to do it. So they hauled-up a section of cable, and when it came in sight, they seen a big black hulk hanging there. Come to find out it was a baby whale— a baby whale had got himself tangled up in the cables, which at that point branched out into a network of 4 smaller lines — and this baby had thrashed about till he bent the cables around his body. He was all snarled up, and must have [?] finally choked to death.

It's the loneliness / of the sea kinda contributes to the growth of the imagination, I guess. All a fellow's activity is liable to be mental, since there isn't much physical exercise a cable operator gets , outside of working his wrist over the key. Aboard ship, with nothing to look at, day or night, but sea and sky, you get a strange feeling about / life on land. Like it's

too much hustle and bustle and hurry and scurry— only three minutes from Wall Street to Times Square on the Express, and an average of 2000 cars crossing the Triborough bridge every hour— speed and noise and neuroses. While in my radio room out at sea it's as quiet as a hospital zone, and there seems to be a long slow pause between each seperate tick of the clock on the instrument [?] board. Through the portholes you can see the ocean glassy smooth for miles, and the sky pitched over it like a big high tent. And you know your boat is just a little speck [?] bobbing up and down on all that calm space.... a space so wide that nothing can reach it but radio waves.

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Yeah, there's plenty of space out around you alright, but in most radio cabins I've worked in, you have to stay doubled up like a jack knife, the room is so small and crowded.

The most miserable eight days I ever spent was aboard a whaler off the coast of Nova Scotia. Those Scotians have nerve—they called this ship the “Leviathan”! And it was more the size of a walnut shell. Crowded! Jeez, you had to open the cabin door to take your pants off. There wasn't room for the receiving set and the bunk both. My pillow was right across the receiver, and the tail of the mattress on the spark yap.

This ship was manned by a bunch of [blue-noses?]— herr herring chokers-they're they're all fishing ships out that way— and those Nova Scotian fishermen are the only bastards who can stand the cold. They never take a bath— smell like whale blubber. Won't use a table for eating either, but reach right into the pot under the galley stove and dip up the chow with their hands.

First thing I remember that trip, two hours out of the channel, I'm on the receiver, and I get a whiff out of their corncob pipes— Five Brothers Tobacco— and was it rank!

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Everything smelt of whale blubber, and tobacco and dead fish — and it was so cold you darsent stick your nose on deck for air. Eight days was enough of that. I shipped on the Mary B “Mary B,” running down to Boston— back to civilization.

For awhile I stuck to passenger ships after that. You naturally get more chance to make aquaintances on such a trip than if you're cooped up on a tanker or freighter. You're handling personal cables for the most part, and sometimes you strike some funny ones. Two years ago I was on a boat bound for Rio and Buenos Aires. It's a long hop, and the radio transmitter covers only part of the distance. Some of the messages we had to relay. Well, one time I got a message. One word was all it was. It took about three hours for the other operator, who was pretty far South down toward Rio, to pick it up. This message was one word: “Waiting.” Signed some gal's name.

Two, three days, and the answer came through. I threw the letter back on the same relay chain. It was just one word: “Coming,” signed Charlie. Funny people.

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I remember a better one. Threw a message, says:

“Arriving 7 p. m. Please bring overcoat 73” (Seventy-three, appearing on a cable message, means “Best Regards.”) Comes the message back, like this:

“Meeting ship. Why overcoat? You'll have me to keep you warm 88 (Love and kisses)!”

Like I said, a cable operator at sea hasn't much chance to be sociable. I guess I was never so lonely in my life as the first year I worked aboard the “Grenada”. She was a food ship, carrying no passengers, and the crew was mostly Spicks and a few Mexicans, and all I could understand of their lingo was “Hello” and “Goodbye.” # But it was my second trip on the Granada “[Granada?]” that I found myself a buddy. Jimmy was a swell fellow. Not a night went by but what we'd have a little chat— over the wires. Now and then we'd [?] play a game of chess— by calling out the moves and writing them down on a rough diagram

of a chess board we'd each made. I knew Jimmy for two years. Our conversations sure helped to fill up those empty spaces for both of us.

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Can you picture an intimacy between two men who have never seen each other . ? I knew Jimmy intimately— everything about him, down to the brand of cigarettes he smoked. I never / actually met him. He was an operator on a tanker down around Dutch Guiana. We corresponded regularly for almost two years by radio. [?] [?] Somehow we never ran together in the same port. But I knew him better than the fellows I see every day. He sent me some beautiful letters by wire. It just happened he struck oil with me. We discovered we had the same tastes in everything. He was well read, and interested in Psychology. I was too at that time. You know, funny thing, I always used to picture him as looking like me. Dont know why— except it seemed we even thought alike.

The ship would be riding smooth. It would be night, dark water. I'd stick my head in the port hole and see a star way out there. I'd think, his ship's as far out away from mine as that star. Sentimental maybe— you get that way— The sea is lonely—any seaman will tell you the same. I used to think, I've never seen him— maybe I'll never see him. Yet I know him like I know 9 myself.

This fellow, Jimmy[.?] loaned me some money once. We had been beached for two weeks / in New Awlins and when we pulled out again, I was flat. He wired me a large sum. I decided when next I got on the beach again, I'd look him up— he was to visit his family that summer. I figured I'd meet him and return the money. I looked forward to it, and yet, in a way, I was prepared to have my illusions shot. You [?] build up a dream— you picture it your way— and the real thing usually falls short.

Well, anyway, the ship made port, and no sooner I was on land, I sent Jim a letter— to his home. I waited a week, didn't hear from him. Then the letter came back marked non-

delivery. On the stamp they check the reason why not delivered. There was a check in the column where it says 'Deceased'.

I continued out to his home. I met his family. [?] [????] They told me Jimmy had died suddenly of fever in the tropics.

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I had only ten days to make ship, but I laid off, stayed ashore, and missed the boat. When I shipped out again, it was on another vessel, an oil tanker, the “Solitaire”. She laid up in Mobile and discharged at Portland, Maine.